



DaVaughn Thornton, an athletic redshirt freshman, appears to have a bright future at tight end.
Photo Courtesy: Chris Kirchner



03/16/2010 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: Thornton Hopes To Lend A Hand (Or Two) At TE

BOULDER - Along with linebacker, the University of Colorado football team's position affected most by graduation is tight end, where assistant coach Kent Riddle waved good-bye to key contributors Riar Geer, Pat Devenny and Devin Shanahan.

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Help was never that far away. Over the winter, veteran Luke Walters was granted a sixth season of eligibility, and at the start of spring drills Riddle said hello to former quarterback Clark Evans. He also was getting further acquainted with DaVaughn Thornton, a still-raw but highly promising redshirt freshman whose athleticism stood out during a season-long scuffle with the learning curve.

Midway through the 2009 season, Riddle said this of Thornton: "You watch him and you're pretty amazed . . . he'll be so much better when knows what he's doing."

That's changing. Thornton's grasp of the position is growing daily, and he's looking more and more like a tight end. Since playing his final basketball game for Denver East, he's gone from about 215 pounds to his current weight of 238, and CU coach Dan Hawkins envisions Thornton being able to

put 10 or so more pounds on his 6-foot-4 frame.

"I think he can be a 245- or 250-pound guy who can run and catch," Hawkins said. "He's got great hands, can run and he's tough.

"In the fall, he was running the same route most of the time. But I think he's beginning to get a feel for things."

No question, CU's defense is feeling him. In Monday's practice, Thornton took a pass over the middle, bulldozed one defender and carried another couple for several more yards.

Thornton expects no less of himself on every reception, every snap.

"I'm trying to be the No. 1 tight end - the starting tight end on the field all the time," he said. "I came out to play football, and that's what I intend on doing. Whether it's a running play, pass play, whatever, that's what I want to do - be on the field."

During his first year at CU, he considered Geer "basically my mentor, my big bro on the field. He taught me everything - moves, the smoothest things you can do to get around a defender, all that stuff. He was here for five years, so who better to listen to?"

Besides Riddle, of course. His position coach says Thornton's blocking technique needs touching up, as does his on-field assignment recognition and execution.

"If you sit there and quiz him, he knows exactly what to do," Riddle said. "If it happens fast, sometimes he (hesitates and analyzes). But I'm very pleased with his progress.

"You would always like it to be faster and more perfect, but he's doing a nice job. His athleticism or his ability to want to do it have never been in question. He works hard, studies . . . but there's no magic formula to make up for experience."

Thornton believes he's moving past the point of on-field hesitation: "At first it was thinking, then doing it. Now it's just the 'doing it' part. I had a whole year to pick up on blocking techniques and assignments. Hopefully, I'm getting it now."

Thornton's high school athletic resume was impressive. In addition to lettering four times in basketball, he punted for East until CU teammate Zach Grossnickle joined the team. Then, Thornton transferred to the front end of the punting duty - long-snapping. He also snapped on placement attempts.

Currently, Thornton says he's practicing mostly with CU's second offense and getting occasional 'reps' with the first unit. The upper tier of Riddle's depth chart includes junior Ryan Deehan - Riddle calls him "Mr. Reliable - he knows exactly what he's doing" - and the veteran Walters ahead of Thornton, Evans and redshirt freshman walk-on Alex Wood. There are two spring walk-ons, Matt Allen and Joe Fleming.

When CU utilizes an H-back/fullback in the backfield, the first call likely will go to the 6-5, 245-pound Deehan, who made 10 receptions for 91 yards last season but could be utilized more this fall.

"That's one of Ryan's real strengths . . . he's very good at it when we move him into the backfield," Riddle said. "He's very reliable (as a receiver) underneath and will catch everything. Plus, he's had a couple of big-time, down-the-field plays in the last couple of years."

The tight ends' weekly role in the offense still is being determined, Riddle said: "We're still trying to figure out where our strengths are . . . but all those guys have ability to catch the ball. Some are more vertical threats, some are bigger targets in the middle. We're trying to piece all that stuff together, especially when you're not game-planning things (as during the season)."

"But they'll definitely be factors . . . Riar was a pretty good factor for us, and Pat for that matter. I'd say we'd build on what they did and try to continue."

Between them, Geer and Devenny accounted for 49 receptions (556 yards) and seven touchdowns last season. Geer posted 36 catches for 402 yards and four TDs, while Devenny caught 13 passes for 154 yards and three scores.

Both were former high school quarterbacks - and that didn't go unnoticed by Evans, who arrived at CU last summer as a quarterback but was queried about a position switch during his season-ending evaluation with Hawkins.

"He told me, 'you're athletic, we can find another position for you,'" Evans recalled. "Then, Coach (Eric) Kiesau talked to me and asked if I wanted to give tight end a try, and I said, 'I'll just go do it and become a full-time tight end.'"

"I talked to Pat and Riar about the transition, and Pat said just to keep working at it and get better every day."

At 6-2, 225, and as much a runner as he was a passer at Los Alamitos (Calif.) High School, Evans already met most of the tight end size requirement, although he's hopeful of adding another 10 or so pounds.

The receiving part of his new position doesn't pose a problem; as a QB, Evans believes he's already caught more balls than most receivers during pitch-and-catch sessions in high school with other quarterbacks.

But blocking, he admits, is new territory and techniques must be learned.

"But I'm excited," he said. "I love playing football and just being out there. So far, it's been fun and coach 'Rid' has told me I'm doing well."

Riddle offered verification: "He's picking it up . . . when you sit there and quiz him, it's all good. Then, when things happen fast, there's a matter of getting it done correctly without hesitation. But that's going to come with experience."

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SHOW MENU

There are two sides to CU's Prince

Receivers appreciate coach's tough, yet friendly nature

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/17/2010 12:01:30 AM MDT

"Pull up your pants."

It was the first bit of coaching Robert Prince gave to Colorado wide receiver Toney Clemons and it came before Prince even was officially a member of Dan Hawkins' coaching staff.

Earlier this winter as Hawkins was searching for a wide receivers coach, Prince came to Boulder for a visit to get a look at the program, the campus and the town. He also was able to meet a handful of his future players during a dinner at a local restaurant.

Clemons wanted to meet the man who was interviewing to be his position coach and get a feel for how they might get along. He swears he isn't one to walk around with his pants hanging low or "sagging" as he calls it, but apparently there was just enough of a sag to get Prince's attention. It was the first indication that Prince doesn't let much slide.

"At first I thought he was just joking around with me, but he kept saying it and I realized he was serious," Clemons said. "He looked at me and said, 'If I come here, we're going to have a problem. Pull up your pants.'"

Clemons admits he was initially caught off guard by Prince's assertive approach, but like many of the wide receivers on the CU roster this spring, he has grown to love that side of his new position coach.

Prince previously worked for Hawkins at Boise State from 2001-03 coaching wide receivers. He moved on the National Football League where he coached with two franchises, including the Seattle Seahawks the past two seasons.

Hawkins and Prince kept in touch after Prince left Boise. When Hawkins took over as wide receivers coach last season following the post-spring coaching staff shakeup caused when former offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich bolted for Oregon, Hawkins phoned Prince to pick his brain about coaching the position. He asked Prince for guidance on techniques and drills for practices and they communicated throughout the season.

Prince didn't know he would need a job this winter and Hawkins didn't figure to be looking for a wide receivers coach for the second year in a row. He had named Ashley Ambrose receivers-coach-in-waiting last summer, and Ambrose actually filled the job for two weeks in December until secondary coach Greg Brown left and Ambrose was given the opportunity to coach the secondary, where he played 13 years in the NFL.

That turn of events and a coaching change in Seattle led to Prince being available. He said he chose to come to CU because of his relationship with Hawkins.

Prince is now nearly halfway through his first spring in the program. He has seen enough to know the strengths and weaknesses of each one of his players and he is getting to know them better every time they step on the field, meet to watch film or just sit and talk.

"I like all my guys," Prince said. "They will give good effort all the time and they want to get better. We're still just trying to clean up all the little details, in every group, including ours. I think we're getting there."

Prince's coaching style is every bit like that first meeting with Clemons. He is a commanding presence on the field, but he's not always the officer barking orders and corrections. He can be the grunt in the foxhole with his guys, too. He runs sprints right along side the players after practices and he sometimes races down field celebrating a good play with chest bumps, slaps on the helmets and congratulations.

"He sparks us. How can you not be excited when your position coach is excited," sophomore wide receiver Will Jefferson

said. "He beats half of us down there celebrating half the time. He's really doing a good job of being a good coach but also being a good teacher."

Another example of the tough side of Prince came out at the end of practice Monday when he met with his wide receivers on the field and could be heard yelling about turnovers and mistakes throughout practice. He dismissed the group in a fashion that made it clear the bar had been raised.

"I just feel like these guys I treat like my son," Prince said of his style. "If they're doing great, I'm going to be their biggest cheerleader, but if there is something that is not right, we're not running a happiness camp. If I need to get on someone, I'm going to get on them, just like if they were my child."

Prince will also serve as passing game coordinator in the CU offense. He said he has worked with offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau to incorporate some tweaks to what Kiesau already was doing. Quarterback Tyler Hansen said he enjoys the vibe Prince brings to the offense.

"He definitely knows his stuff," Hansen said. "He's been in the league and knows the passing game for sure. He's going to help us out a lot."

Prince has inherited more talent and depth at the wide receiver position this fall than has been present in Boulder in any season since 2003 when Derek McCoy, D.J. Hackett and Jeremy Bloom were on the roster together. If everyone stays healthy, it could be difficult finding playing time if your name isn't Clemons, Jefferson, Scotty McKnight or Markques Simas.

"I've played more than four guys, and I don't have a problem with that," Prince said. "If guys deserve to play, then I don't have a problem with that. But I'm not going to say we're going to take out somebody just to put somebody in and hurt the integrity of a play."

"If a guy can play, he can play. If he's not ready, he's not ready."

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Longmont, Colorado
Wednesday, March 17,
2010

Publish Date: 3/17/2010

Buffs linemen rounding into shape

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — If it seems like too long since Sione Tau and Max Tuioti-Mariner have played in a football game, there's good reason.

The two offensive linemen have been in the Colorado program for multiple seasons but have spent much of their collegiate careers in places other than the field. They're participating in spring drills, working on a line that struggled with inexperience and injuries a year ago. And Tau and Tuioti-Mariner, who came to CU expecting to be contributors, are eager to get going.

"Just sitting down and watching everyone play, it made me want to hit even more," Tuioti-Mariner said. "Not being able to play underneath the lights on Saturday really made me feel left out. ... It's time to start playing again."

Said Tau: "I came here to play football, obviously, and not being able to play for three years is kind of a drag."

Tuioti-Mariner, a third-year sophomore, started in his second game at guard as a true freshman in 2008 but tore an ACL in a Sept. 23 practice that year, ending his season. He tore his other ACL in winter conditioning on March 3, 2009, costing him last season. Tuioti-Mariner also missed his senior season of high school in Corona, Calif., with another torn ACL.

CU offensive line coach Denver Johnson said he has seen flashes of the talent that earned Tuioti-Mariner a starting spot at such a young age. But to return to that level is going to take time, Johnson said.

"There's quite a little bit of a mental hurdle to get over there," Johnson said. "He's still a little tentative. I don't think he's quite turning it loose mentally in there. He's still playing with a little hesitation.

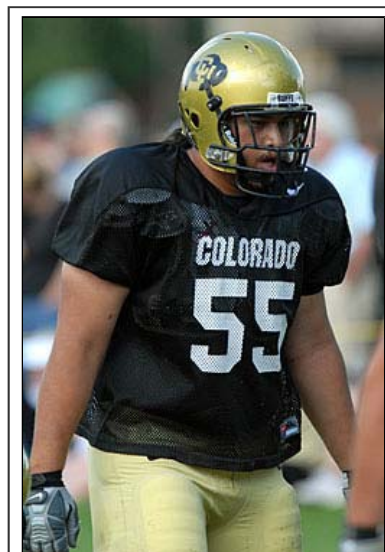
"We'll have to play through that and see how it goes. As we get through spring here, that'll give him some confidence and going through the summer and getting him further away from that surgery. Hopefully, by the time we get to fall camp, he'll be really uninhibited back there."

Tuioti-Mariner is doing whatever it takes to regain strength in his legs, including walking backward up the steep hill that players must climb from the practice fields to the locker room. He called that exercise "just one of the little things" he can do to help. He estimated he's 90 percent recovered.

"I need to practice running sideways. ... Running straight is fine," he said.

Tau started his career by redshirting in 2007. He was academically ineligible in 2008 and "excused" from the team in 2009 for violating team rules. He declined to elaborate on the rule he broke.

Tau will be a fourth-year junior in 2010, and he has yet to appear in a college game. That fact, he said, makes him more



CU offensive lineman Max Tuioti-Mariner is attempting to come back from two ACL tears. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call**

eager to “earn a spot and play.”

Tau said he spent last fall living in Boulder and, to make ends meet, working security for bars in town. He said he’d work 40 hours a week, logging many shifts that didn’t end until 4:30 a.m.

“I really missed playing,” Tau said. “I’d be at work watching the guys play ... and there was nothing I could do to even help the team.

“Now being back, whether it’s third string or anything, I don’t care; it’s just being back and helping the team that really matters to me.”

Tau’s biggest challenge now might be his weight. He said Monday that he weighs 362 or 363 pounds, which is up from the 285 he carried as a senior in Honolulu, where he was Hawaii’s top offensive line recruit in 2006 and the president of his school’s student council.

Tau said he is dieting, which means more vegetables and chicken breasts and fewer fried foods. He said he has lost 20 pounds since January. He’s playing tackle.

Johnson, entering his second season as CU’s offensive line coach, said he has not been around Tau enough to fully evaluate his ability. But he said Tau has an “innate ability to do some things.”

“He can move his feet. He’s a big, strong guy,” Johnson said. “We need to continue to work him and get him in shape and see how quick and agile he can become.

“He still has a way to go to be in the kind of physical condition we’d like him to be in.”

Read Patrick Ridgell’s CU sports blog at www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell. He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.